

Trying to Break a Deadlock

Casualties Increase as Both Sides Step Up Intensity of Fighting

PESHAWAR, Pakistan—In the war between the superpower and the villagers, no one seems to be winning.

During a month-long trip inside Afghanistan, countless images suggested that the occupying Soviet Army and the Afghan resistance fighters are deadlocked in a war that will kill more people and cause more damage this year than last.

Where the Soviets had closed guerrilla supply routes, the *mujaheddin*—the resistance forces—had opened others; where helicopters patrolled by day, caravans passed by night. The *mujaheddin* mount larger sieges against Soviet garrisons and the Soviets conduct broader offensives in response; the guerrillas have heavier weapons than they had before, the Soviets have tighter defenses.

But the image of stalemate in Afghanistan may be misleading, according to some of the people who have followed the war closely since it began. While many western diplomats and the State Department appear to share the opinion that the deadlock is continuing, recent visitors to the country and independent military specialists suggest that several trends in the last year may be giving the Soviets an overall military advantage in the war.

Virtually all observers agreed that the fighting is escalating. Soviet officials, who have long remained silent about their own casualties, conceded last November that they had lost an unprecedented number of men during the preceding year, but they gave no figures. Western sources have estimated that 10,000 to 15,000 Soviets have been killed in Afghanistan since 1979.

Hospitals here in Peshawar, near the Afghan border, say they received more wounded Afghans in 1985 than in past years, but Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq said last October that there are no casualty figures for the resistance forces that can be authenticated.

After years of underplaying the scope of the Afghan war, the Soviet press now focuses on the dangers and sacrifices made by Soviet troops serving here.

Many resistance commanders also concede increased casualties, especially as they and the Soviets have begun fighting larger and longer battles.

Francois Ruffinen, who directs Red Cross operations in Peshawar, said last summer's battle in Paktia—one of the most intense of the war—poured large numbers of wounded Afghans into the Red Cross hospital, which remained full of casualties all winter.

Soviet officials attribute their increased losses to heavier weapons used by the *mujaheddin*. While all observers agree that the guerrillas are becoming better armed, resistance commanders stressed that the newer weapons are reaching only certain areas.

"The limited number of new weapons, like the [Chinese-made] 107-mm rocket, are not changing the course of the war," said Mohammed Es'Haq, political officer of Jamiat-i-Islami, a major Afghan resistance group. The 107-mm missiles—many apparently supplied by a covert Central Intelligence Agency arms pipeline to the rebels—have allowed the *mujaheddin* to hit Soviet targets from a greater distance.

But the *mujaheddin* often do not fire the missiles accurately, according to many observers, and the Soviets have responded by expanding and improving their de-

fenses around the cities and towns they hold. Around Kabul, for example, they have hampered guerrilla infiltration by building guard posts farther out from the city and often within sight of each other.

The continuing depopulation of Afghanistan's countryside has robbed the guerrillas of civilian support—food, shelter and information—in strategic areas, notably along major roads.

During the last year and a half, the Soviets have hurt the *mujaheddin* with attacks by their elite *spetznaz* anti-guerrilla commandos, often dropping them by helicopters onto the mountain ridges above guerrilla positions, much as the British used hill-climbing Gurkha soldiers to ambush Afghan resisters in the 19th century.

"The *spetznaz* are quicker and more courageous than regular soldiers," said local commander Jalat Khan in Razni. "They have silencers on their guns and can always call the helicopters to help them."

"They know martial arts. They kill very well," he said.

Many resistance commanders and western military specialists agreed that the Soviets' most important tactical change is their expansion of Khad, the KGB-run Afghan secret police, now reported to employ tens of thousands of people. A December report by the independent Peshawar-based Afghan Information Center said Khad agents were able to infiltrate resistance organizations and fighting groups as well as Afghan refugee camps carrying out terrorist action and subversive operations.

Resistance groups said Khad had managed to place agents who had pinpointed the locations of key commanders for Soviet artillery attacks, or who had planted bombs such as the one that killed a prominent northern Afghan commander last year, seriously weakening the resistance in the area.

Although Kabul area commander Abdul Haq warned that the resistance sometimes exaggerated Khad's effectiveness, he said its operations clearly had improved. "Every day the Afghans are getting poorer and more desperate, so Khad can buy their loyalty," he said.

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A State Department year-end report portrayed the war as "a continuing stalemate with a higher level of fighting by both the Soviets and the mujaheddin." Describing the mujaheddin as becoming better armed and trained than they had been, the report said: "The increase in [mujaheddin] offensive activity was the most important military development of 1985."

While mujaheddin and western visitors to Afghanistan agreed that the resistance had been more aggressive in many areas, various observers questioned the State Department's conclusions. Several western observers argued that the killing of guerrilla commanders threatens to shift the longstanding stalemate in the war.

"The mujaheddin have only a few good commanders and they're losing them on the front lines. They can't be replaced," said Peter Jouvenal, a British documentary-film maker and military specialist who has traveled with the guerrillas frequently since the war began.

Observers in Pakistan said the State Department had unrealistically accepted assurances from leaders of the Afghan parties that they had overcome long, bitter divisions to unify their political activities.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Arnold Raphel said in December that the seven major parties are "going to open alliance offices around the world to obtain world support." Such a joint diplomatic campaign, Raphel said, "will help transform the resistance movement into a coherent political force representing the national will of the Afghan people."

But western, and many Afghan, observers in Pakistan say the alliance remains symbolic, and holds together largely under pressure from its major aid donors, the United States and Saudi Arabia. "The U.S. government is publicly swallowing the propaganda line" of the parties, one American observer said. "The parties' disunity is their biggest weakness. In their alliance they took seven months just to name joint working committees."

— James Rupert

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SUPERPOWER vs. VILLAGERS



A Soviet tank on Kabul-Ghazni highway in 1984, above. Soviet officials conceded last November that they had lost an unprecedented number of men in the previous year.

SYGMA



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BY WILLIAM CLAIBORNE — THE WASHINGTON POST

Mujaheddin survey rubble of barracks destroyed in 1984 explosion, above; guerrilla searches body of Afghan army soldier after 1985 attack on Soviet-Afghan convoy.